



Indian-Pakistani competition in Afghanistan: Thin line for Afghanistan?

Nov-Dec 2011

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Indian and Pakistani competition for influence in Afghanistan is not a recent phenomenon. Ever since the partition of South Asia and the creation of the Durand Line, India and Pakistan have been grappling for influence over their historically weaker neighbour, Afghanistan. Academic work on Indian-Pakistani competition has waxed and waned with the existing tensions of the past six decades, and recently the focus has been on the potential of a proxy war in Afghanistan and its broader relevance. For instance, a recent academic work on Indian-Pakistani competition in Afghanistan by Ganguly and Howenstein, discusses the history of the competition and concludes with projections on the implications of such competition for regional US policy.¹ With this precedent in mind, rather than make policy recommendations, this article highlights the role of the Afghan government in encouraging and dissuading efforts by Pakistan and India to gain economic and political influence in Afghanistan. This article begins by discussing the ethnic dynamics of this competition followed by a discussion of some of the major examples of contemporary Indian/Pakistani competition for influence. In the post-2001 period, this competition has begun to evolve into two broad categories: economic and diplomatic competition. In conclusion, the article discusses the role of Afghanistan and the potential consequences of its actions vis-à-vis Indian-Pakistani competition in the post-2014 period.

¹ Ganguly & Howenstein, "India-Pakistan Rivalry in Afghanistan", Journal of International Affairs, Fall/Winter 2009, Columbia University



Tactics to gain influence

Similar to tactics used by the British Empire, Soviet Union and other historical invaders in Afghanistan, both India and Pakistan have made use of ethnic divides as a means to export their aims in Afghanistan. During the civil war period of the 1990s a patronage networks based on ethnicity emerged. Afghan politics has always been heavily influenced by the politics of identity and in Afghanistan the most important political identity is that of ethnic affiliation.² India has mostly developed its patronage network amongst non-Pashtun elite: Tajik, Hazara, and Baloch Afghan leaders. For example, the famous Tajik leader from Panjshir, Ahmad Shah Masoud had close ties to the Indian security establishment during his time as a warlord. Meanwhile, Pakistan has chosen to develop its network among the Pashtun population. Pakistan has traditionally closer ties with Pashtuns in Afghanistan, not only because of the large number of Pashtuns in Pakistan, but also because of the relationships developed between prominent Afghan Pashtuns and Pakistani officials during the Afghan war against the Soviets.

Diplomatic Competition

Diplomatic competition mostly manifests itself over the placement and duties of Indian and Pakistani consulates in Afghanistan. For instance, Pakistan has consulates in Herat, Jalalabad, Mazar-e-Sharife, and Kandahar while India has consulates in Mazar-e-Sharife, Jalalabad, and Kandahar.³ Pakistan ostensibly has better reason for keeping a number of consulates in the country as many Afghans have family connections to Pakistan and travel there often. India however, has come under scrutiny for its expansive diplomatic policy in Afghanistan. India argues that the consulates are mostly involved in managing development projects, but they have also been accused of inciting anti-Pakistan sentiment. Particularly in the south, Pakistan has accused India of supporting the Baloch insurgency in Pakistan through its Kandahar consulate.⁴

² Consider the power bases of Afghan political elite.

³ A previous version of this report mistakenly reported a Pakistani consulate in Helmand rather than Herat.

⁴ Qaiser Butt, "Balochistan conflict: 'PM's talks with leaders unlikely to succeed'" 7, The Express Tribune with IHT, August 2011



While India contends that it is sensitive to Pakistani concerns of greater Indian involvement in Afghanistan, merely stating this is not enough to acquiesce Pakistan. Consider this quote from a US official, "India has actually been very careful, very mindful of the fact that Pakistan is sensitive to the types of assistance it provides to the Afghans."⁵ However, this type of rhetoric is almost inconsequential when consulates crop up for dubious reasons and India's interests and involvement diversify to cover a variety of sectors both economic and political.

Economic competition

At first glance, economic competition between India and Pakistan since 2001 looks like a one-sided fight. One glance at the Gross Domestic Products (GDPs) of both Pakistan and India and it becomes quite clear that in terms of possible financial aid or development contributions to Afghanistan, India has a distinct advantage.⁶ However, Pakistan has used its geography as a country bordering Afghanistan, and its political weight to make up for its inability to gain influence in Afghanistan by means of direct financial contributions or investments. The Afghanistan-Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement is an example of Pakistan gaining influence in Afghanistan through the trade economy, while intentionally sidelining India and preventing it from gaining similar advantages. This is specifically highlighted by a clause of the agreement that prevents Indian goods from being exported to Afghanistan, while allowing Afghan goods to be shipped into India as far as the Indian-Pakistani border at Wagah.⁷

⁵ "India mindful about Pakistan Sensitivities over Afghanistan" Tolo News 10 November 2011

⁶ As of 2011, India's GDP was \$1,631,970 billion and Pakistan's was \$176,870 billion. Put another way, India's GDP is approximately 9 times that of Pakistan's.

⁷ From the APTTA final signed document- p.27 October 2010



India, for its part, is focusing on development projects and large-scale investment; for instance a series of dams on Kabul River, the Hajigak Iron Ore deposit, and the Zaranj-Delaram Highway- designed to open up another trade corridor with Afghanistan via Iran at their port at Chabahar. These massive projects are capital heavy and require a level of commitment that Pakistan is unable to offer. As a result of these financial commitments India has been able to reap political rewards in the form of influence and support from the Afghan government on ostensibly unrelated issues. For instance, the recently signed India-Afghanistan Strategic Partnership guarantees Afghan support of a future bid by India for a seat as a permanent member of the UN Security Council (it was also signed within days of the Indian-led mining conglomerate winning rights to Hajigak Iron Ore Project).⁸ Further, Ganguly and Howenstein contend that, “Kabul turns a suspicious eye toward aid from Islamabad due to its past support for the Taliban...” While on the other hand, India is actively seeking a broader pan-Asian influence- its policy towards Afghanistan is no small part of this effort. This attempt at broader pan-Asian influence can quickly be (mis)interpreted by Islamabad to mean an encirclement policy- something Pakistan has feared (and has actively worked to prevent) for decades.¹⁰

Role of Afghanistan

With regard to Indian/Pakistani competition, Afghanistan has something in common with certain African countries during the Cold War. These countries (e.g. Ethiopia) would play the US and USSR against each other as a means to garner as much support as possible (often be purporting a specific ideology). The Afghan government is accepting as much aid as possible from India while encouraging closer security and economic cooperation

⁸ From the Afghan Indian Strategic Partnership document, available from MEA of India's website

¹⁰ Encirclement policy is also known as an extended security horizon, the response to Pakistan's strategic depth doctrine in Afghanistan. Pakistan fears that India is encircling it on two fronts, by means of a pro-India Afghan government that would weaken Pakistan economically and strategically.



with Pakistan. Meanwhile, in order to minimize the overt appearance of Indian-Pakistani competition in Afghanistan, the Afghan government is making gestures designed to deflate competition between the two rivals. A recent example is the speech given by President Karzai in Delhi in which he declared, “Pakistan is a twin brother, India is a great friend. The agreement that we signed yesterday with our friend will not affect our brother.”¹¹ (The agreement he referred to was the Indian-Afghan Strategic Partnership.) This statement suggests that the Afghan government is aware of the competition between India and Pakistan in Afghanistan, but is attempting to acquiesce both sides in order to continue garnering positive support from both parties.

Up until now Afghanistan has largely been able to maintain an overtly neutral position in the face of the Indian-Pakistani rivalry. However, the usefulness of neutral rhetoric may run out shortly after the international forces are drawn down from Afghanistan in 2014. Afghanistan will soon gain greater independence in forming its regional foreign policies, and while it may be principally focused on increasing economic cooperation across the region, India and Pakistan will likely still attempt to sideline one another’s influence on Afghanistan’s future. Pakistan will continue to be, “extremely nervous about India’s growing political and economic presence there.”¹² Thus, eventually the Afghan government may no longer be able to pander to both its brother and friend in exchange for favourable policies and contributions. At this point, Afghanistan will have to weigh its decision between greater contributions to the economy from India and the security concerns that could result from the ostracism of Pakistan as a result of closer ties with India.

¹¹ “Pak Twin Brother, India a great friend: Karzai” Indian Express, 5 October 2011

¹² Slavin, Barbara “India Pakistan rivalry Afghanistan’s Gordian Knot”, Inter Press Service 27 July 2011



Given its past reluctance to accept aid from Pakistan and the sheer economic advantage of India, it is most likely that Afghanistan will grow closer to India both diplomatically and economically in the post-2014 period. This closeness may compromise Pakistani influence, which could spark a retaliatory response from Pakistan. A result of which would likely inflict more damage on Afghanistan than India. At present, Afghanistan is focusing on economic cooperation, saying to both countries that its priority in the long term is economic cooperation. Events such as the APTTA- which is designed to reduce barriers of entry for cross border traders- and the recently signed India-Afghanistan Strategic Partnership-which focuses heavily on greater economic cooperation in specific industries such as processing, transit and mining sectors, suggest that Afghanistan is focusing on bolstering its economic relationships with its neighbours. In recent months, however, not much has been gained in this sector. It is possible that economic cooperation could lead to greater security cooperation, but it is equally likely that problems with the security relationship with Pakistan will push Afghanistan to focus greater economic effort on the relationship with India while alienating Pakistan. This, while justifiable from an emotive or even strategic perspective, is actually counterproductive in the long-term economic view. This is because of the closely correlated economies of neighboring developing countries and the highly unlikely occurrence that Afghanistan will be able to expand its economy without inputs from Pakistan.¹³

Some analysts have argued that the US endgame in Afghanistan could have an impact on the way in which Pakistan and India interact in Afghanistan, impacting their own bilateral competition.¹⁴ One of the oft-repeated claims from the governments of India and Pakistan is that they will permanently be near Afghanistan, and have a great deal

¹³ Collier, Paul "The Bottom Billion", Oxford University Press, 2007

¹⁴ Radu Nikolaus Botez, "India, Pakistan strike friendly tones, but Afghan endgame likely to affect relations" Open Democracy, 2 November 2011



invested in its long-term stability. Economic and diplomatic involvement in the form of aid or less formal patronage networks could work to encourage a stable Afghanistan. However, an alternative is that if bilateral Indian-Pakistani competition boils over into an unconcealed heated competition in Afghanistan without the moderating influences of the US and NATO, Afghanistan could once again find itself in a dangerous, Machiavellian, and potentially destabilizing neighborhood.